

Student Activism in the Global South: The Formation of Political Capabilities in Higher Education

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

The role of student activism and its potential in fostering justice in higher education institutions is now widely acknowledged in the global South. In South Africa specifically, higher education student activism became more prominent in the past decade with movements such as #FeesMustFall. Such activism has become a space for students to raise their concerns and develop political capabilities. By political capabilities the paper refers to freedoms to express political ideas and engage in protests, including capabilities to for dialogue, for practical reasoning, for voice, emotional expression, contextual knowledge and physical wellbeing. Drawing on the ideas of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, who have developed the capability approach, the paper further considers that working together, constraining factors, agency and valued political capabilities shape higher education opportunities and obstacles for a potentially transformative political space which can contribute to more democracy and greater justice in the university.

Full paper

The paper focuses on issues of social justice and its importance in the South African higher education space. Specifically the study considers the significance of the university as a transformative democratic space for the development and enhancement of students' political capabilities. Using the vehicle of student activism, particularly but not only social media student activism, the research aimed to understand student perspectives and experiences for an account of the potential of such activism in the enhancement of valuable political freedoms and transformative change. Social media is both claimed to promote political participation and deliberations, and on the other hand, criticised as failing to influence real policy change. Work on social media student activism in South African higher education, has also highlighted the need for a theoretical explanation and analysis in the face of contested views. Drawing on recent events in South African higher education institutions, which saw a resurgence of student protests organised on social media and in-person, a qualitative case study was undertaken at the University of the Free State. Volunteer students from the SRC, activist organisers as leaders and student-participants were asked how they understand activism and its purposes, institutional staff members with knowledge of student governance were interviewed to obtain a university perspective. Unexpectedly, given the study's initial focus on social media activism, findings indicate the centrality and the potential rather of face-to-face activism to bring about transformational change within the university space, even though social media played an important role in informing and organising

students. Importantly, evidence points towards an understanding of student activism as enhancing students' opportunities to raise their concerns and express their voices as a collective, and to form their political capabilities. These political capabilities emerged as a key focus for the interpretation of interview data. By political capabilities the study refers to freedoms to express one's political ideas and engage in protests, and these include the capability to participate, capability of dialogue, capability for practical reasoning, capability for voice, capability for emotional expression, capability for contextual knowledge and capability for physical wellbeing. Across the three groups of students a similar political capabilities set emerged as valuable, although formed in slightly different ways across the three groups. The expansion of political capabilities was found to enhance the development of a meta-capability to transform, dependent on the development of other capabilities. Moreover, political capabilities were collective capabilities, that is capabilities formed through interaction in and within a group. The study further considered the intersectionality of conversion factors and processes which work to enable or constrain political participation by students. Finally, the role played by agency in student activism is discussed. Working together, these factors of a political capabilities set, working collectively for transformation, conversion factors and agency shape higher education as a potentially transformative political space despite the obstacles, and which can contribute to more democracy and greater justice in the university.

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